

## CULTIVATING COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING (COIL) EXPERIENCES FOR UNDERGRADUATE HEALTH EDUCATORS IN THE CLASSROOM

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### Abstract

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a globally networked classroom that prepares students to understand the interconnectedness of the world. Previous studies have found that US students need to learn about the world, languages, and other current events compared to their counterparts. Notably, this becomes concerning for students majoring in health fields, where there is a need for culturally competent health educators to aid in improving health outcomes, providing quality care, and contributing to eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities. This study explains an undergraduate COIL experience created by two institutions within the United States and The Netherlands. The study seeks to explain the emergence of the institutional partnership, course content, digital technologies, and students' perspectives on the COIL experience. Institutional partnerships were created by two professors from the United States and The Netherlands. They created a COIL course sustained for the past five years. Students are paired with individuals from the opposite country to collaborate on prominent health issues impacting our global world. Over the past five years, topics have included lifestyle interventions, COVID-19 impacts, mental health, physical activity, and nutrition. Students came together virtually to exchange ideas using digital technologies, like Zoom, Skype, What's App, Facebook Calling, Instagram Live, and other unique platforms. Blackboard was used as the Learning Management System (LMS), where the structured tasks, assignments, and materials were outlined. The innovative COIL project aimed to understand and appreciate cultural differences, acquire digital communication skills, and build skills to attain cultural competence. A qualitative thematic analysis was used to ascertain participants' perspectives regarding the effectiveness of the COIL experience and the impacts on their student learning. Students completed online open-ended questionnaires related to their global learning experiences. Results yielded three categories and eight themes. *Category 1: Impacts on Student Learning* had three emerging themes (1) Cultural Immersion, (2) Global Problem-Solving, and (3) Diverse Perspectives. *Category 2: COIL Experiences* identified two emergent themes of (1) New Friendships and (2) Learning a New Language. *Category 3: Tools* had three emergent themes (1) Time Management, (2) Openness, and (3) Communication. COIL affords all students the experience of studying abroad without leaving the classroom and without the financial burden that prohibits many students from participating in traditional international experiences. COIL initiatives are essential for those seeking degrees in the health field because their future careers will consist of creating health initiatives and programs face-to-face and virtually.

**Keywords:** Collaborative online international learning, health educators, technology, and cultural competency.

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### 1. Introduction

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a globally networked classroom that prepares students to understand the interconnectedness of the world and creating productive and responsible members of society. As the world becomes more interconnected, educational challenges to develop individuals who exhibit intercultural competence become increasingly more important (Byram, 1989; Branche, Mullennix, & Cohn, 2007; Brewer & Cunningham, 2009; Gurung, 2009; Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Stearns, 2009; Wilkinson, 2012). Previous studies have found that United States students lack knowledge about world geography, languages, history, and current events compared to their peers worldwide (Stearns, 2009). This lack of knowledge translates into students who are less prepared to function in a global society (Bender-Slack & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2018). Notably, this becomes concerning with students majoring in health fields where there is a need for culturally competent health

educators who aid in improving health outcomes and quality of care, and contributing to eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities (Betancourt et al., 2002). Using digital technologies offers meaningful and rewarding opportunities to develop international partnerships between health educators from other countries without economic, organizational, or geographical barriers. Despite the reported advantages of COIL, few studies have been identified in the public health and health science sectors. This study aimed to explain a COIL experience for students between two higher ed institutions within the United States and The Netherlands. The study aims to explain the emergence of the institutional partnership, course content, technology usage, and students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the COIL experience and the impacts on their student learning.

### **1.1. Importance of cultural competence for college students & health educators**

As the United States becomes increasingly more culturally and ethnically diverse, there is more need for culturally competent health educators with the skill sets to develop culturally appropriate health education and promotion programs. Cultural Competence is defined as a “set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Diller & Moule, 2005) – showing that the ability to be culturally competent is imperative in increasing understanding and improving relationships across cultures (Nieto & Booth, 2010). Given the current multicultural climate within the United States, health educators must be trained to achieve cultural competence and apply this concept in planning, implementing, and evaluating health education and health promotion programs (Luquis & Perez, 2003). With an increasingly diverse global workforce, employers look to colleges and universities to equip their students with skill sets that include cultural competence, cultural sensitivity, and awareness (Chang et al., 2013).

### **1.2. The COIL experience: U.S. & The Netherlands**

**Emergence of Institutional Partnerships.** The study’s COIL experience was created by two international professors (United States and The Netherlands) who met at a conference in New York City. The two professors discovered they had mutual interests and taught courses within the health field that could result in a well-matched collaborative international experience for both institutions. After refining the COIL project and piloting it with students, both instructors brought in two other faculty to participate and combined two Dutch health courses with two US health courses. The four professors collaborated to create and facilitate global learning experiences for their students. This study was carried out during the Spring 2020 semester, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when both U.S. and Dutch students were abruptly removed from the classroom amid the global public health crisis. Given the uncertainty for both countries at this time, students found themselves conversing with their international partners and sharing public health information regarding the pandemic, thus increasing their understanding of global issues and becoming more globally aware of one of the most historic years of their time. The professors paired each student with a student from the opposite country. They were considered buddies or partners collaborating on creating a lifestyle intervention or program regarding nutrition and physical activity. Creating a space where students could share mutual health promotion skill sets and explore diverse global health perspectives is essential in providing health students with authentic learning experiences to further their application in the field.

**Digital Technologies.** The Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) was a tool already used by the U.S. institution. With the help of the institution’s curriculum designers, the Dutch instructors and students easily migrated into the same blackboard shell as the U.S. students. This LMS hosted the structured tasks, assignments, and materials needed for students to explore their partner’s countries and submit their artifacts along the way with their virtual partners. Students from the partnered institutions came together virtually to exchange ideas and analyses using different technology sources such as Zoom, Skype, What’s App, Facebook Calling, Instagram Live, and other unique social media platforms.

**Course Content.** During these virtual collaborations, students were diving into deep discussions about planning a behavior change program related to nutrition and physical activity in their country. Students discussed cultural differences related to health equity issues, governmental health initiatives, and the overall demographics of their target populations to prepare them for future careers where they need to be culturally and linguistically competent. This cultural awareness aims to help students respond to individual and community preferences to help decrease health disparities. The virtual think, pair, share method utilized for many assignments to engage students with their partner and their country is a cooperative discussion strategy that works in three phases (Robertson, 2006). The first phase, “Think,” is the task that provokes students' thinking, often done before partners meet virtually. The second phase of “Pair” uses their international partner to talk through critical thinking schools their perspective or response to the assignment or task. This is where partners started to experience how health educators

differ in developing health promotion interventions and programs around the globe. The last phase, known as “Share,” allowed students to discuss ideas and further their reflection, which they would complete their assignment artifact that would then be submitted to the LMS and shared with all students. This critical dialogue between students helps challenge learners to identify, analyze, and relearn their understanding of the world and different cultures (Giroux, 2011). The learning outcomes associated with the COIL assignments and activities aimed to develop an understanding and appreciation of cultural differences between the U.S. and The Netherlands, acquire digital communication skills, develop cultural sensitivity to understand individuals from another culture better, and build skills to attain cultural competence.

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative descriptive methodology was used for this study. The Netherlands and the U.S. students completed online open-ended questionnaires about their global learning experiences and cultural competence levels. A thematic analysis was done to ascertain participants' perspectives regarding the COIL course, such as their enjoyment and areas for improvement moving forward. Researchers intended to gain insight into how participants viewed the COIL course design and implementation to make any refinements needed for future cohorts. The COIL course has been sustained for the past five years, reaching a total of  $N=157$  undergraduate participants from a U.S. traditional 4-year institution in New York ( $n=75$ ) and ( $n=85$ ) undergraduate students from The Netherlands University of Applied Science. Participants were both enrolled in health courses at their respective institutions that focused on concepts related to assessing the needs of individuals and communities to create/plan evidence-based health initiatives. Participants completed an online questionnaire before (pre) and after (post) the five-week COIL project. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the DePaul Global Learning Experience (GLE) questionnaire were adapted as the measurement instruments for this study. Pretest and post-test questions came from The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), assessing students' self-efficacy and cultural competence with questions addressing comfortability with language, self-efficacy-related questions, openness and interest in different cultures, and the existence of contacts from other countries. Additionally, questions from the Global Learning Experience (GLE) questionnaire were added to the posttest questionnaire to evaluate the effectiveness of the COIL program and its impacts on students learning. The questionnaires were posted on the combined learning management system for students from both countries to complete.

## 3. Results

Results yielded three categories and eight themes. Category 1: Impacts on Student Learning had three emerging themes (1) Cultural immersion, (2) Global problem-solving, and (3) Diverse perspectives. Category 2: COIL Experiences identified two emergent themes of (1) New friendships and (2) Learning a new language. Category 3: Tools, which identified three emergent themes of (1) Time Management, (2) Openness, and (3) Communication. The first **Category 1: Impacts on Student Learning**, was used to identify students' personal narratives about the impacts on their learning. The themes that emerged from this category were cultural immersion, global problem-solving, and diverse perspectives. The *Cultural Immersion theme* emerged from students' responses about how they experienced integrating themselves into another culture through interaction with their international peers.

“I found the COIL course interesting, but it was also challenging learning how to communicate effectively with an international student. Everyone has their own life, of course. But it's interesting to see that we both have very different cultures. Being able to discuss our different lifestyles and experiences as health educators was very helpful in my journey.”

“I enjoyed getting to know and communicate with someone from another country and learning the cultural norms of the Netherlands and the differences/similarities there are to the United States.”

“I thought it was interesting getting to speak with someone from another country about health in their country and what their degree looks like; I have never got to do this before, so it was extremely interesting. It was neat to see how our partners put together health information.”

“I talk about the COIL project all the time, and recently used it in an interview. It was definitely life-changing, it gave me a whole new perspective.”

Another emergent theme from this category was known as *Global Problem-Solving*, which teaches students how to research and analyze important global health topics and think creatively about the

future. Students expressed how they collaborated and worked together with their international peers to problem-solve and create collaborative health materials.

“Learning about who my partners were and what they did. What the differences and non-differences were between us regarding mental health interventions. Like I learned so much, I never would've through just reading an article or watching media about the Netherlands. It was great to work together to create a final photo voice project because neither of us had ever done that before, so it took some critical thinking and problem-solving to understand how we would approach the collaboration with both international perspectives.”

“We had to use some problem-solving and time-management in order to properly communicate. I think having everyone download the same communication application could be helpful for all students because it worked for us. We had to work together to understand how it worked so that it was easier to contact each other in the beginning. For example, I did not know how to use Zoom, but I learned because of this international project.”

The last theme that emerged from Category 1 was *Diverse Perspectives*. Diverse perspectives explain how students developed the capacity to understand interrelationships regarding different health topics such as lifestyle interventions, COVID-19 impacts, mental health, physical activity, and nutrition.

“Interacting with the students from other countries on a collaborative topic and project through sharing research, photographs, and interviews gave us common grounds to relate and talk. Being able to communicate and relate to those around the world despite any struggles with cultural differences was very informative for me and my own personal growth and competence.”

“I would like to share how this opportunity was a great one to meet other people and share how our environments are different from each other; these perspectives have helped me see things differently.”

The second **Category 2: COIL Experiences**, was used to identify students' personal narratives about their overall enjoyment of the experience. The themes that emerged from this category were New Friendships and Learning a New Language. Students experienced how they made new friendships which often was not an expected outcome.

“Thank you for connecting me with people from another country; this wouldn't have been possible if I was not in this course. I feel like I have made new friends internationally.”

“Making a new friend and talking about things that interest us both was refreshing. I did not expect to make a friend internationally when signing up for this course.”

The Learning a New Language theme emerged from student narratives about using different languages.

“It was a bit hard to communicate in English, so sometimes it was a bit hard. But I thought it was a fun experience that will help me in the future!”

“It was nice to meet new people and see how schools work in the USA. It helped improve my English use, which I was not expecting.”

The third **Category 3: Tools**, was used to identify students' use of communication, technology, and digital aspects of the course. The themes that emerged from this category were Time Management, Openness, and Communication. The *Time Management* theme came from students' accounts about managing time differences with partnered meetings.

“The time difference was an issue because there is a 5-hour difference. We struggled to find a common ground during the first few meetings and had to really look at our own time management to make it work with our schedules because we both had full plates.”

The second theme, *Openness*, emerged from students' narratives about being vulnerable and open to experiences.

“I was able to learn how to be more open to learning and understanding other people's opinions.”

“One thing that was difficult for me was learning how to work with people despite having major differences.”

The third and final theme was *Communication*. Students explored how communication tools helped them with the COIL experience and how they learned different tools.

“I learned how to use new communication tools like Snapchat to contact people from the U.S. I had never used this tool before.”

“I learned that communication as a tool is key in being successful with this assignment. Being able to communicate with others and relate to the world around us is important in our field.”

#### 4. Discussion

Students participating in COIL shared many positive narratives and experiences regarding their interactions with their international peers. Not only did students meet the course's learning outcomes, but they also found currency in many other ways, such as global competence, the opportunity to foster and sustain international friendships, and global problem-solving. Most notably, allowing students to learn more about global health through the lens of international peers provided them with first-hand knowledge regarding major public health topics. These authentic learning experiences help refine students' cultural awareness and prepare them for their health careers. Specifically, it is important for health promotion students to consistently refine their skills to become culturally competent health educators that can develop culturally appropriate programming and materials for individuals and communities globally. COIL affords all students the experience of studying abroad without leaving the comfort of their own homes and without the financial burden that prohibits many students from participating in traditional international experiences. From the results, many students mentioned how they would not have been able to participate in an experience like this if it was not structured as part of their course. Implementing COIL initiatives is essential for those seeking health promotion and education degrees because their future careers will consist of creating health initiatives and programs both face-to-face and virtually. Instructors in higher education are tasked with preparing students with the transferrable skills needed to acquire jobs where they may never meet their coworkers or supervisors face-to-face (Harris, Seo, & McKeown, 2021), making authentic learning experiences with both cultural competencies and technology essential components of our student's future and elements that are easily embedded in the core of COIL.

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